

Even the Gentiles

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Amos 9:5-7; Acts 11:1-18
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
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Over these last few weeks, we've explored our Lenten theme of 'hospitality and service' from a handful of different angles. We've explored how hospitality is a matter of the heart, and is not about following some set of rules; we've seen how it draws us towards lives of service, and how that may well require us to modify our organizational structure, just as the early church developed the role of the Deacon in order to attend to Greek-speaking widows who were being neglected; we've seen how hospitality can come from unexpected people and unexpected places, like the daughter of Pharaoh in the book of Exodus; and how hospitality and service lead us more deeply into, lives of humility.

Today, we will explore the ways that hospitality has to do with how we *see* people, and having eyes to see the ways that other people are beloved by God, just as much as we are. Seeing the belovedness of others and of ourselves is always a humbling experience because humility has to do with seeing ourselves and others as God sees us. Humility is never about beating ourselves up, or about being passive, or about becoming some kind of a human doormat. Humility – which is related to a word for the earth, *humus*, and to the word 'human' – is about being grounded. And the best way to be grounded is to see yourself with the eyes of God.

So... God 'brought them up.' In Exodus 20, at the start of the 10 Commandments, God says to the people of Israel, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt." Later, in Amos 2:10, the Lord says to Israel – using a different Hebrew verb – "I brought you up out of the land of Egypt." Israel's self-understanding and identity was that they were the beloved of God, the chosen ones of God, rescued, redeemed from slavery to serve the Lord in freedom. God had brought them up out of Egypt. They were God's beloved. This was the heart of Israel's identity, just as it's the heart of our Christian identity. Place your hand on your head, and say, "I am God's beloved."

What the prophet Amos confronted, however, was that over time, that tender but strong sense of themselves as God's beloved ones had hardened into an assumption that they were God's *only* beloved, that they were exceptional, entitled to special privileges and status as God's chosen ones, and as such they had something of a monopoly on God's affections. That God loved them more than other peoples, and that God would ignore the things they did that were contrary to God's will and God's covenant. Amos confronted them with the ways they were living that made a mockery of the covenant God had made with them. The poor were being mistreated. They flaunted their wealth and accumulated excess in the face of large swaths of their community who were scraping just to get by. They began to do these sorts of

things with impunity because, after all, they were the ones whom God had brought up from the land of Egypt in the Exodus. They were special.

Which leads the prophet Amos to an astonishing, and somewhat obscure, little verse in Amos 9:7, where God says, “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Arameans from Kir?”

Yes, Amos says, God did an exodus with Israel. But according to Amos 9:7, God also did an Exodus with their enemies the Philistines when *they* were in bondage, and God did another Exodus with their enemies the Arameans (in modern-day Syria) when they were in bondage. Turns out that God is the God of emancipation, freedom, liberation, and exodus, and God’s emancipatory energy is not owned by any one people. God’s affections were not confined to the people of Israel. God has emancipatory relationships with people beyond the chosen ones. God chooses Israel, but God chooses others, as well. We may not have access to the texts about the Exodus of the Philistines or the Exodus of the Arameans, but God says, ‘Don’t let the fact that you don’t know about them lead you to think that you’re the only ones I care about.’

Turn with me to the book of Acts in the NT. In Acts 11, this expansive understanding of God’s redemptive, relational power comes to a head when the Holy Spirit leads the apostle Peter to enlarge the boundaries of the covenant community beyond the early Jewish believers in Jesus, to include Gentiles. When Peter does this – a story that is told in Acts 10 – word gets back to headquarters in Jerusalem, in Acts 11:1, that Peter has admitted Gentile outsiders to the community. And so there is something like an emergency Session meeting in 11:2, where we are told that the circumcised believers, those who were the religious insiders at the time, criticized Peter and said, ‘Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?’

Can you hear what they’re saying? They don’t belong here. They don’t share our customs. They don’t speak our language. They don’t know how to do things. They don’t act right. They’re not like us.

Then we are told that Peter began to explain it to them “step by step.” Gotta love that. Step by step, as though Peter is talking to little children who needed the cookies put down on a lower shelf so they could reach them. “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as it had upon us. And I remember the word of the Lord that there is not only an outer, external baptism of water, but there is also an inward baptism of the Spirit. And if God gave these outsiders, these ones who are not like us, these ones who do not do things like us, if God gave them the same gift given to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus, who was I that I should hinder God?”

And then Peter was quiet.

And so were the ones who had criticized him out of their desire to do what they thought was the right thing, defending the boundaries and walls and exceptionalism of their community.

In that silence, the Spirit of God broke open the tombs of their control and their felt need to protect themselves and their community and their religion, and their hearts began to soften towards the outsiders. “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” And because of that response, you and I, and so many other Gentiles, were welcomed into the church.

We never have a monopoly on God’s attentiveness and affection. We do not have a monopoly on God’s relationships. God has emancipatory relationships with people we don’t know, with people we will never know, with people we may not like, with people who do things differently than us, and there is never any point in trying to keep God’s blessings to ourselves. Like the manna in Exodus 16, when we try to keep God’s blessings to ourselves, try to hoard them for ourselves, the blessings spoil and go bad. God’s blessings – of forgiveness and guidance and presence and companionship and community and peacefulness – all of which we know through our own interactive relationships with Jesus as our Lord and Savior, all of those blessings are meant to be shared with others, in the sure knowledge that God already has a pre-existing relationship with them, that God already has a claim on their lives, and that God has already been at work in their lives, long before we ever encountered them. 1st John 4 tells us that ‘we love because God first loved us,’ but it is also true that ‘we love because God first loved *them*.’ Anytime we welcome anyone, anytime we reach out to anyone, anytime we extend our hearts to someone else, we are reaching out to someone whom God already knows, whom God already loves, and in whose life, God has already been working. Hospitality and service are ways that you and I participate in and share God’s pre-existing, ongoing love for the world. To God and to God alone, be all the glory, now and always. Amen.